OPINION

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We’ve Hit Peak Denial. Here’s Why We Can’t Turn Away From Reality

We are living through a terrible time in humanity. Here’s why we tend to stick our heads in the sand and why we need to pull them out, fast

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Culture Opinion

If it seems like things are kind of off these days, you're not alone. Recently, more than 100,000 people liked a post marking the start of the pandemic that said, "[Four] years ago, this week was the last normal week of our lives."

Objectively speaking, we are living through a dumpster fire of a historical moment. Right now more than one million people are displaced and at risk of starvation in Gaza, as are millions more in Sudan. Wars are on the rise around the globe, and 2023 saw the most civilian casualties in almost 15 years.

H5N1 bird flu has jumped to cows, several farm workers have been infected, and scientists are warning about another potential pandemic. According to data from wastewater, the second biggest COVID surge occurred this winter. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates at least 24,000 people have died of COVID so far in 2024.

Last year was the hottest ever and recorded the highest number of billion-dollar weather and climate disasters. Not to mention that over the past few years, mass shootings have significantly increased, we've seen unparalleled attacks on democracy and science, and mental health issues have skyrocketed.

Truth be told, things were bananas even before the pandemic: just think of the Great Recession, the 2009 swine flu pandemic, and Brexit. Academics use terms like "polycrisis" and "postnormal times" to describe the breadth and scale of the issues we now face.

Welcome to the new normal, an age where many things that we used to deem unusual or unacceptable have become just what we live with. Concerningly, though, "living with it" means tolerating greater suffering and instability than we used to, often without fully noticing or talking about it. When authorities tell us to "resume normal activities" after an on-campus shooting or give

guidance on how to increase our heat tolerance in an ever-hotter world, we may sense that something is awry even as we go along with it.

But what happens when overlooking and tolerating greater levels of harm becomes a shared cultural habit? Like the proverbial frog in boiling water, we acclimate to ignoring more and caring less at our own peril. In the short term, living in a state of peak denial helps us cope. In the long run, it will be our undoing. Because the danger here is desensitization: that we meet this unprecedented litany of "wicked problems," from climate change to the rise of fascism, with passive acceptance rather than urgent collective action.

How does this happen? How do we overlook and become hardened to bad things, especially in this scientific and technological age, when we've never been more capable of understanding and addressing them? To resist complacency, we must first understand how it operates.

Social scientists have long investigated the social organization of denial or how we collectively achieve reality-adjacent lives in which we do not recognize serious problems or they are made to seem normal. What research has found is that a key way we come to "not see" social problems that should beg for our attention is that disturbing or threatening information is neutralized or evaded.

COVID is a good case study for illustrating the "Collective Denial Playbook" that underpins our new normal reality.

A common strategy to neutralize a social problem is to make knowing about it hard, often by restricting efforts to look into it, like scaling back COVID tracking. In April the CDC ended the requirement that hospitals report COVID admissions and occupancy data, removing one of the last tools we

could use to monitor what's happening. "We now enter the blackout phase of epidemiology" wrote science journalist Laurie Garrett on X, adding: "There will be patients, but their numbers and whereabouts will be unknown…." Disappearing is also accomplished by not alerting the public. For example, during the winter surge, we heard "crickets from the White House." In fact, as COVID positivity and death rates rose, tweets from CDC director Mandy Cohen decreased.

If the COVID situation is tracked and the public warned, things don't feel normal. But if we don't monitor or mention it, then things can feel "back to normal"—fine, even.

Another tactic is minimization. How we describe and measure things shapes how we feel about them. Which is why it's important to notice when neutralizing language enters the chat. For some time now, turns of phrase like "endemic" and "during COVID" have been common vernacular. So have refrains like "lower hospitalizations than last year." All of this gives off an "it's just a cold," "mission accomplished" vibe, casting the disease into a worry-free zone that's safely behind us.

This minimization keeps the quiet part quiet: that "the world is still in a pandemic" per the WHO; that more than 73,000 Americans died of COVID in 2023, a higher number than from car accidents or influenza; among those infected, 9 percent and counting have long COVID, a serious and often disabling condition with a disease burden comparable to cancer or heart disease, and an economic cost rivaling the Great Recession, and for which there are no approved treatments. What's more, each infection is associated with a substantially increased risk of health issues like cognitive dysfunction, autoimmune disease and cardiovascular problems, even for mild infections.

Pre-pandemic, these statistics would have been eye-popping. Now they constitute "back to normal." We think we no longer have a problem, when actually we've just changed the standard by which we deem something concerning.

Yet, to shore up collective denial, we often do more than revise the present; we also rewrite the past. So not only do we reiterate that we are better off now, we claim things were never that bad. This sort of "forgetting work," or contesting the past to remove unwanted memories, produces a cultural amnesia about the pandemic. And in burying the past, we sidestep accountability for what went wrong and preserve the status quo by failing to implement lessons learned from our own history.

Finally, truth tellers are the Achilles heel of collective denial because they call attention to what's swept under the rug. Thus another playbook tactic is to hush them up, often by painting them as subversives or deviants. And so those who wear masks are ridiculed, scientists reporting on COVID-19 risks are cast as fearmongers, and those with long COVID are dismissed as having anxiety disorders.

Time and again, society pressures people not to see, hear or speak about the elephant in the room. To maintain our own "cognitive tranquility," we tune out, malign and shoot the messenger because they remind us of what we would rather disregard. Just look at physician Ignaz Semmelweis, environmentalist Rachal Carson and NFL player and social justice advocate Colin Kaepernick. Indeed, people are regularly punished for being accurate.

These tactics are how we *get used to* so many bad things, from mega-fires to insurrections.

So what can we do about our "Ignore more, care less, everything is fine!" era? We need to stop enabling it. This starts by being more attuned to our "everyday ignoring" and "everyday bystanding"—like that pinch we feel when we know we should click through a concerning headline, but instead scroll past it.

We need to work harder to catch ourselves in the act of staying silent or avoiding uncomfortable information and do more real-time course correcting.

We need to guard against lowering our standards for normalcy. When we mentally and emotionally recalibrate to the new normal, we also disassociate from our own humanity.

We need to demand that our leaders give the full truth and hold them to account. We must stand up for the silenced and stand with the silence-breakers.

To counter the new normal's assault on normalcy, we must double down on our duty to know, to speak up, and to remember.

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